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The Nameless Diner

OC OC

The nameless diner was new. It was a small thing; a single tiny room with a counter and a long bench, with an old jukebox sat at the far wall. Its size made sense, given that it was built into the side of a ship barely powerful enough for space travel. It just showing up in the market square out of the blue was surprise enough for Qozel.

The bigger surprise was that it was run by a human.

The galaxy at large had only begun interacting with the fledgling race within the past galactic decade, humans had only just met the rest of the galaxy in the grand scheme of things. Treaties between the Sol government and the Spiral Union were still being ratified, and the idea of Humanity joining the Union were absurd for such early days. To this day, seeing a human at all was a rarity, let alone interacting with one, and they were often given a wide berth out of sheer unfamiliarity.

All Qozel could do was stare as the diner's owner wiped down the bar. They were only half as tall as Qozel, with smooth, chestnut skin and wavy, raven hair that sat in heavy locks on their shoulders. By contrast, Qozel was a basheth, a quadrupedal reptilian with an upper torso shockingly reminiscent of the biped before him. He flinched when the human locked eyes with him. They waved at Qozel, who waved back weakly as he slowly inched toward the exit. Qozel stopped when, silently, the human poured a glass of beer and set it on the bar. Without a word, they continued wiping down the counter.

After a moment's hesitation, Qozel padded up to the bench, and sat down, being careful not to sit atop his left forefoot. Given his size, this took up a sizeable portion of the bench. "What's with the drink?" he asked.

"Consider it a promotion, to celebrate me setting up shop here." the human said, not taking their eyes off their task.

Qozel blinked, then took a sip of the offered beverage.

Then, the two went quiet. The human went about their business, while Qozel occasionally sipped his beer. After a few minutes, the human asked: "What happened to your foot?"

Qozel could still feel a dull throb beneath the hastily applied bandage. "Stepped in some glass." he said with a grimace.

The human sucked in air through their teeth. "Been there." they said. "Dropped a glass in the kitchen. Thought I swept it all up, but I didn't."

Qozel grunted. His injury was also the result of his own actions. But he wished he had just dropped a glass, it would have felt less depressing. How'd that bottle even get there? Before he realised it, Qozel had emptied his glass. His stomach dropped. It was too early for this.

"Refill?" asked the human.

Against his own desires, Qozel said: "No thanks.", and began standing up.

A glass of water was put down in front of him. "On the house." was all the human said.

Qozel stared at the clear liquid. How long had it been since he'd drunk water? He looked toward the human, who was polishing glasses. "What's on the menu?" he asked quietly.

A large plate of grilled fish was put down in front of him, with a fresh glass of water. "Thanks." said Qozel.

"Not a problem." replied the human. The taste of the fish took Qozel back to a better time, when he was young, and had little to worry about beside his schooling. He would have shed a tear, were his species capable. Instead, his thick tail involuntarily curled into a tight ball.

"My cooking can't be that good, can it?" joked the human.

Qozel swallowed his mouthful of fish. "Shut it." he said defensively. "You've done your research, haven't you?"

The human smiled. "I gotta know my clientele. More water?"

"Please."

Qozel heard the splash of water filling a glass, then: "Name's Till." The human held out Qozel's drink.

Gratefully, he took it. "Qozel." he responded after a moment.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance." Till said with a flourish.

"And mine yours."

Till grabbed a glass. They made for the beer tap, then paused, briefly glancing at Qozel. They poured themselves a cola instead.

Qozel opened his mouth to thank them, but thought better of it. "So, what brings you out here?" he asked.

Till thought, glass to their lips. "I was just making my way along the B-48 to Corax Hub when I saw a link ring to here. And I thought: 'The quiet would do me some good, so why not?' So I took it, and here I am."

Qozel balked. "You passed up one of the most populated hubs in the galaxy, for this place? How much money are you losing?"

"Doesn't matter. I've got plenty in savings." Till's tone was entirely unconcerned, peaceful.

Qozel laughed, his tail slapping the bench. "No way you're doing this just because you like it. In this poky thing that could barely break atmosphere? You'd have to be desperate for this to be your vehicle of choice. Why are you really out here, doing this?"

Till blinked, and set their glass down. Slowly, their expression shifted from content nonchalance to stern recollection. "Yeah, actually. Never really liked my home much. It was one of the skeevier places on a moon colony. Gangs found it a good place to set up shop, and that just killed it, for everyone. Soon enough, everybody that wasn't a gangster or in their pocket packed up and shipped out. I was the last one. I bought this junker for pennies, fixed her up the best I could, and got out of dodge as soon as I could get her running. Squatted in a surface garage for about a year while I made her presentable, then I worked those streets for a few years while I saved up. I was doing pretty well, too. But all the time, I couldn't get that colony out of my mind; it was always above my head, like it was watching me. So when I decided that I'd saved up enough, I just left. And I've been hopping planets since." They punctuated their exposition with a hearty slamming of their glass down onto the bar. And like it never happened, their expression was once more one of contentment. Then, a knowing, inquisitive smirk fell on their lips. "Now then. Seeing as I've shown you mine, how's about you show me yours?"

It took a second for Qozel to realise what they meant. And after a moment's hesitation, he laid his forefoot on the bar. A dirty, bloodstained bandage was wrapped crudely around his foot, weaving inbetween his toes. "I stepped on a half-empty bottle when I got out of bed." he said solemnly. It hurt to say. "At this point, I can't sleep without a good few drinks in me. Come morning, I always have a hangover and no memory of falling asleep." It hurt to say, but it was a good hurt, a necessary hurt. He knew that, deep down.

"Damn." Till replied quietly. "Do you work?"

Qozel chuckled painfully. "You think I can get work anymore?" He sighed. "Nah. Nobody will hire a drunk; word's gotten round. I'm just lucky for my pension and my parent's old house."

"Would you like to?"

Qozel blinked as the question unraveled itself in his mind. "What?"

Till looked back into the tiny kitchen behind the bar. "I've been thinking of expanding the place a bit. More seats, bigger kitchen, the whole shebang. Problem is, to make it work, I'll need more staff." Till looked back to Qozel. "So how 'bout it?"

Qozel sagged. He'd been stared at in the street, mocked by former co-workers and customers alike. Seen his life spiral down the neck of a bottle. It took him and held him down, forcing him to live in a perpetual state of self-destruction. He had almost forgotten what kindness felt like, what it was like to feel like a person rather than a walking series of bad decisions. One question nagged at him. "Why?" he asked, half expecting to hear that this was all a jape, so he could return to his bitter squalor.

Till smiled. "Same reason I'm out here: why not?"

Qozel's tail curled into a tight ball.

Word had gotten round that a certain staff member was a bit on the temperamental side, and was occasionally seen sipping light beer at the counter while the owner wiped it down. But the eatery's recent patrons rebuffed the rumours. By all accounts from the people of Corax Hub, the besheth on staff was an amiable sort, and got on well with both customers and the owner. Still, something seemed a bit odd about him.

Qozel felt terrible. He had traded one kind of hell for another. Every fibre of his body was telling him to stick his mouth beneath the tap and drink until he couldn't stand up straight, then drink some more. The diner's many-specied patrons drinking casually didn't help matters. But he stayed the course, and went dry until it was closing time. He collapsed into a wide chair in the ship's lounge behind the bar, melting into the leather. He heard the clink of a glass on the nearby table, and accepted the water gratefully. "Well done." said Till, heading out to do some last-minute cleaning. Every sip of water cleared Qozel's head that little bit more, and Till's words of encouragement aided more than Qozel believed they knew.

The nameless diner was new. It was a small thing; a single room with a counter and bench, a pair of tables, and an old jukebox sat in the corner. The ship it was attached to was a cozy little box about the size of a cottage. It just showing up in the middle of Corax Hub, and doing well, was surprise enough for Qozel. The bigger surprise was that he was sober enough to remember it in the morning.
